



Problem Solving Through Community Action: An Interactive Chat with Jeff Franco

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." -Margaret Mead

Anyone can think about serving their community, but putting service ideas into action is when  real change happens. Jeff Franco of City Year Washington, DC and instructor of the ["Attracting and Motivating Volunteers"](#) lesson joined us at the U.S. State Department to discuss his views and offer advice on community action through a Facebook Live video chat.

Franco, originally from Cleveland, Ohio, moved to Washington 20 years ago to further his studies and eventually found his place at City Year DC. In his role as vice president and executive director, Franco advocates for youth involvement in the education of children in underserved communities. Participants aged 17-24 take a year to volunteer in schools as friends and mentors in order to close the gap between what students need and what schools are able to provide. Not only is City Year's work beneficial to the students and school districts receiving the assistance, but also to the volunteers, who strengthen their social awareness and build leadership skills during their rigorous year of service.

Being Authentic Leaders

Responding to a request from the online audience for advice to young leaders in community  service, Franco talked about the importance of being authentic in your work, especially so in leadership and community service positions. Finding an intersection between your passion and the needs of the world is absolutely necessary to be successful. He described a leader's work as a "beautiful struggle," pointing out the hard work and dedication that is needed to be rewarded with the change you want to see in the world. He went on to emphasize the importance of an authentic leader to provide continuous inspiration to volunteers.

Young volunteers have a special aptitude for being authentic leaders. According to Franco, most people have a desire to serve, but youth especially have the energy necessary to act on that desire. City Year's role is to harness that energy and organize it into a channel for education services.

Interacting with the Community

One obstacle you will need to overcome is how to get involved in a new community. Different cultures may exist or the community members may not always be welcome to your mission at first. It's important to understand the different cultures throughout the community and listen to what their needs are. Franco advises volunteers trying to start in a new environment to take the time to understand the problems the community faces first and ask them what they need from the organization. This shows that the group cares about the community and is there to serve. One mistake City Year made was trying to implement goals in different schools without listening to the requirements of each school system. This clash of ideas strained the relationship between the two

groups but also helped City Year learn how to improve their system for starting in a new place.

Passion for service is a wonderful thing, but Franco points out the need for “humble swag.” This concept illustrates the balance needed between sharing your organization’s accomplishments and having a genuine interest in helping others. Your desire to make the community better should outweigh the need for recognition, but it is important to further your organization’s good work by promoting events and ways to get involved.

Overcoming Challenges

There are many obstacles that people can face, especially when trying to start a new nonprofit organization. Not everyone may be receptive to the work you are trying to do, and failure along the way can set you back. Franco said that if there are people who do not agree with your mission, try listening to them and understanding their needs. There may be room for compromise. He also emphasized that failure is important because it can help you and the organization improve. Always remember to return to humility and the basics of why you want to serve the community, then listen to the critiques and the voices in your community and use those to improve your service techniques and strategies.

“Failure is a beautiful thing in the long run, as long as you get back up.” -Jeff Franco

Learning from mistakes and failures is essential to improving your nonprofit. City Year uses surveys to learn from each service opportunity as well as self-critique from employees and volunteers about what went well and what could be improved upon. This is essential in providing the best service to your community. Constant evaluation will move your organization forward.



Moving Forward

“Where do we go from here?” Franco advises young leaders to use the resources available, such as free tools like social media and building coalitions within your network of people who believe in your goals. Take advantage of young people who have the desire to make a difference in their communities. Above all else, you must stay committed to your goal. You must have the desire and commitment to create change, because it will be a struggle, but it is a beautiful struggle.

[American Conservationist Learns from Kenya](#)

Join #YALIGoesGreen this month. Learn how to get involved at yali.state.gov/climate

By Karin Rives

Adam Whelchel of The Nature Conservancy with Wangari Maathai, the founder of Kenya's Green Belt Movement. (The Nature Conservancy)

After practicing and preaching environmental conservation for the past 60 years, The Nature Conservancy knows a thing or two about strategy. So when Adam Whelchel, a conservation director for the U.S.-based group, traveled to Kenya in 2009, he thought he would teach the Green Belt Movement in Nairobi how to, well, run an environmental movement.

Instead, he says, "I walked away as a student."

In fact, the 38-year-old Green Belt Movement (GBM) is a formidable force in the struggle to protect East Africa's threatened water and forest resources. On its list of accomplishments is the planting of some 45 million trees, not a small feat in a country where competition over land is fierce.

Whelchel said he has been humbled by GBM's remarkable ability to overcome conflicts and bring together people with different interests. "I saw that in every village I worked with them. People show a tremendous pride over their relationship with GBM," he said.

He was also impressed by the commitment he witnessed. GBM staff, he said, will put in 14-hour days to try to save their country's environment — and then still have energy for a joke at the end of the day.

The ability to laugh, no matter how big their challenges, Whelchel said, may give the conservationists in Africa an edge over many of their peers in other parts of the world.

Planting a Grass-roots Organization

Wangari Maathai, who founded the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, won the Nobel Peace Prize for her work in environmental conservation and women's rights. (© AP Images)


GBM's world-renowned founder, Wangari Maathai, began small in the late 1970s, gathering village women to grow seedlings and plant trees. After operating under the government's radar during the early years, her rapidly expanding movement caught the attention of Kenya's then-president, Daniel arap Moi. He and others in power didn't appreciate the fact that women were organizing on their own.

In an old public speech shown in a 2008 documentary about Maathai's work, Moi can be seen criticizing a "certain woman" who had dared to rally other women to plant trees. "According to African traditions," Moi said with a wry smile, "women must respect their men."

But Maathai continued, fearlessly, to organize communities in the country's semi-arid countryside, winning over more women and eventually men, teachers, children and politicians. In 2004, she became the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts. Maathai stayed involved with the group's advocacy campaigns while writing articles and books at a prolific pace until her death in 2011.

Moi left power years ago, but East Africa's environmental challenges remain. Today, GBM enjoys support from the Kenyan government as well as from seasoned environmental groups such as The Nature Conservancy. GBM staffers in Nairobi, London and Washington continue working to recruit new activists and obtain funding to increase the organization's impact.

Strategy for a Growing Movement

The Green Belt Movement teaches  environmental education to Kenyan schoolchildren. (The Nature Conservancy)

Whelchel traveled from his office in Connecticut to Nairobi to help GBM take what he calls "a business approach to conservation."

"It's a way to think strategically about what priorities do we have and what actions need to be taken to achieve those priorities, and to then measure the outcome," Whelchel said. "Without such plans ... your messaging isn't as sharp. People want to see a return on the investments and how their efforts have made a difference, and without having a way to measure, you're less effective in telling that story."

The Nature Conservancy returned Whelchel to Kenya in January 2011, this time to conduct a workshop focused on how GBM can incorporate watershed management in its strategy for Kenya and other parts of Africa.

Trees are critical to a healthy ecosystem because they help retain rainwater and replenish groundwater supplies. Kenya, however, has lost almost its entire forest cover in the past half-century due to illegal logging, tea plantations, and pressures from a growing population that must clear land to grow food.

Today, only 6 percent of the country is covered by trees.

Deforestation has aggravated droughts and also affected energy supplies. Kenya depends on hydropower for 44 percent of its electricity, making the entire economy vulnerable to water shortages.

"The prognosis is not good, and one thing they need for sure is more forest that can capture and filter more rainwater for the people who need it," Whelchel said.

Wanjira Mathai, the daughter of the movement's founder and its international liaison, said she remembers her mother telling her and her siblings at an early age to fight for what they believe in. Mathai (who spells her last name without the double a) has since earned a business degree and transitioned from a job in public health to work full time for GBM.

“We have benefited tremendously from the exchange of technical knowledge that has enabled us to not only do our work more efficiently, but also talk about our work in ways that demonstrate the impact,” she said.

Today, GBM is stronger than it has ever been as it networks with similar organizations in other parts of the African continent and with people in power.

“It’s one of the things that has become so wonderful,” Mathai said. “The government is the custodian of these forests, so we need to be working with them.”


Childhood Illness Inspires Nigerian to Malaria Action

Oluwamayowa Salu, a YALI Network member from Nigeria, founded the Iba [Yoruba word for malaria] Eradication Foundation and organizes malaria prevention and education efforts in Lagos and the surrounding areas.

“Malaria kills and we need to stop it.”

Sub-Saharan Africa suffers more cases of malaria each year than any other world region, mostly among children under 5 years of age, according to the World Health Organization. However, the toll of malaria is on the decline and deaths in the region are down almost 50 percent. Work of groups such as the Iba Eradication Foundation are key to that decline.

Oluwamayowa Salu shares his experiences and advice for other young leaders interested in starting similar disease-prevention campaigns in this interview.

A World Malaria Day program in Lagos  featured a bed net distribution. Pictured are Lagos U.S. Consul General Jeffery Hawkins, USCG Lagos’ Deepa Sipes, Oluwamayowa Salu, and Ojosipe Bimbo. Photo courtesy O. Salu.

Question: Why are you interested in malaria prevention?

Salu: I grew up in one of the dirtiest places in Lagos — the commercial capital of Nigeria — called Bariga. It’s mostly swampy, and this definitely meant lots of mosquitoes [the carriers of the disease-causing parasite].

My elder brother and I used to hide under a tattered mosquito net, but I still ended up with malaria

again and again. I landed in hospitals many times to be treated for malaria instead of being in school. I lost some of my primary school years.


Because of this experience, I grew up saying I would do something about malaria, thus I founded my organization. I am awestruck to find out later that malaria kills a child every second. I am a lucky one to have survived the disease.

Q: How did you get the Iba Eradication Foundation started?

I started with material support from some organizations and I used my very small salary to support my organization till I gained some traction and recognition. I wrote proposals and letters to Exxon Mobil, Lagos State health agencies, Red Cross International and so many others. Our awards and seed grants also helped us move forward.

To implement our projects, we have worked in many communities and partner with the local nongovernmental organizations, youth associations and community development organizations. So we get lots of volunteers from there and we have been able to build a huge database. We also make use of social media to recruit volunteers.

Q: The Iba Foundation has distributed insecticide-treated bed nets, a key measure to avoid nighttime mosquito bites, which can cause infection. How do Lagos citizens adapt to bed nets?

Keeping a neighborhood clean and  eliminating mosquito breeding places is a key part of the malaria eradication strategy.
Photo courtesy O. Salu.

Salu: There are some difficulties in the use of bed nets. This stems from the average size of a Lagos family, and the size of the house they inhabit. About four or five people might sleep in one room, so it becomes very inconvenient and difficult to use these nets. We have large-size nets, but using them may mean poor ventilation. Then, with Nigeria's power problem, there is often no electricity to power the fans for air circulation. So people prefer to sleep without the nets and bear the consequences.

Some people believe malaria is already part of our DNA, so there is no use sleeping under the nets. If you fall ill once every three or six months, that is the way of life. You walk into a pharmacy and buy some drugs to treat the illness. Many Nigerians believe that curing malaria is easier than preventing malaria.

But bed nets are only one of the methods of preventing mosquito bites. Convincing people to adopt these practices depends on using many behavioral communication tools.

We discovered lots of people muddle things up about malaria. Because of the very sharp rise in use of smartphones, we decided to create apps that can educate, inform and communicate behavioral change to people. Apps can be downloaded and accessed by anybody, anywhere, so they are faster than the use of pamphlets or town hall meetings. I have seen lots of malaria mobile apps developed by young people, and I have even developed one.

Comic books are another information tool we are working on. Children are the age group most affected, but I found that local education curriculum offers just two or three lines about mosquitoes and malaria. That is very bad.

With comics, you can create a generation that knows what to do and that will grow up with the right information about the disease. At Iba Foundation, our first malaria comic book publication will be in English language but our aim is to have it translated in many languages. Nigeria has over 250 tribes, and other sub-Saharan African countries are affected by the disease, so our work is well cut out for us. We will do it.

Q: How can other members of the YALI network become involved in disease-prevention education?

Salu: We need to innovate beyond use of bed nets. Malaria kills, and we need to stop it. I have read about what young people all over Africa are doing about educating people about malaria, but I think the very first step is to educate people about keeping the environment sparkling, spotlessly clean, and eliminating the conditions that allow mosquitoes to breed. This is why environmental sanitation is central to our malaria eradication efforts.

Q: How have you seen bed net distribution and other educational activities improve practices and reduce disease in Lagos?

Salu: Bed net distribution has really reduced the disease drastically. Through the support of organizations like the U.S. President's Malaria Initiative, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Exxon Mobil's Malaria Initiative, the Roll Back Malaria Partnership and a working synergy between local government and NGOs, bed net distribution has reached lots of low-income families, and villages too.

For example, I have slept under a mosquito net every night for years now, and I have also helped distribute them through my organization to thousands of people. Malaria is becoming history for bed net users like me. We also collect data before and after our net distribution programs, and the impact has been remarkable. We did some research after one campaign and found that our educational programs helped reduce the number of malaria cases in one community by 45 percent.

Q: Do you find other young adults like yourself are generally aware of malaria prevention techniques, or do more YALI Network members need to help spread the message?

Salu: I am knowledgeable about malaria because it has affected me and I am passionate about ending it, but a lot of people are still very ignorant on how to avoid it. Some believe not staying under the sun, not overworking and avoiding eating bad food will reduce possibility of getting malaria, but those things are not true.

We definitely need more YALI Network members to spread the message, and we will be glad to incorporate interested YALI Network members into it.

At Iba Foundation, we are already looking at forming a youth malaria alliance all over sub-Saharan Africa. We know there are young people all over the sub-Saharan African region who have been affected by the disease in one way or the other and are very passionate to end it. We know young people have ideas and innovations to implement locally that could "fast-track" eradication of the

disease. The alliance could offer them a platform to develop those ideas. We are hoping to start small and spread out, with support from both local and foreign organizations, of course.
